

Documents on Diplomacy: Resources

Special Notes for the Instructor

Reading Between the Lines...

- APRIL 7, 1861** The first document in the series is from the outgoing U.S. Minister, G.M. Dallas. The news was not going to be welcomed in Washington, so Dallas played it safe and did nothing. He reports that he is taking no action because Adams is coming with fresh instructions: crisis postponed.
- APRIL 27, 1861** The second document [which all the students read *first*] is Seward's response. Because of some rather intemperate comments that Seward had made in Washington, the British believed he was trying to provoke an external war as a way to counteract the secession crisis. (They got this idea because that's pretty much what he said.) Seward is a brand new Secretary of State and he does not realize how he is limiting his future options. If, upon arrival, Adams delivers Seward's instructions as written, it will provoke the British to recognize the Confederacy and maybe give them aid. This would be a disastrous outcome for the Union.
- MAY 17, 1861** When Adams sends his first dispatch (No. 1) on May 17th, he *has not* seen Seward's instructions of April 27th so he is able to calm the situation a little and find out that the British have no intention of getting more involved beyond what they've already done. Adams knows that if he takes a very belligerent stance, the British will be forced to respond in kind. Adams knows the situation is grave, but his tone is very offhand. He's trying to create some breathing room.
- MAY 21, 1861** Seward's May 21st dispatch is responding to the information contained in the last message from *Dallas*—he has not seen anything sent by Adams. This is a well-known telegram because the instructions if followed as written will lead to war.
- MAY 21, 1861** Adams's May 21st dispatch is really masterful. He knows what Washington wants but he has not received Seward's explicit instructions, so he and Russell figure out a way to sidestep the problem by sending it back to Washington for solution. The two of them, sitting in a room, worked out a way to avoid war.
- JUNE 6, 1861** By June 6th, Seward received Adams May 21st report, has calmed down, and fully endorses the course Adams has taken. There is one more danger point for Adams, which he discusses in his June 14th dispatch. He is duty bound to carry out Seward's May 21st instructions, but he does so in such a way that it does not cause more controversy.

Adams does this over and over again during the war.

Notes provided by the Office of Historian, State Department of the U.S.